

Geotourism Council explores new strategies, partnerships

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Valerie Cassity, Special to the Kern Valley Sun

The Kern River Valley Geotourism Collaborative held its first meeting to consider the benefits of the Sierra Nevada Geotourism MapGuide project.

The Sept. 8 meeting, held at the Kernville Chamber building, featured guest speakers Steve Frisch, President of Sierra Business Council, and Bob Kingman, Mt. Lassen Area Manager of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. Frisch and Kingman explained the project is a collaborative effort between the Sierra Business Council (SBC), Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) and National Geographic. The pair described the economic rewards the Kern Valley could reap and how local residents can support the program.

Geotourism, explained the speakers, sustains or enhances the geographic character of a place – its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage and the well-being of its residents.

“The Sierra Nevada Geotourism Project seeks to celebrate the Sierra Nevada as a world-class destination while contributing to the economic health of the region by promoting sustainable tourism,” organizers said.

“This will leverage economic development while sustaining a sense of place and maintaining local character,” said Frisch.

The project consists of three components, a print map guide, an online map with detailed information about each feature, and the geotourism council. The council will convene in each area of the Sierra, thus allowing local people to determine which destinations are best suited for promotion.

Because local residents will nominate the destinations to be included in the guide, Frisch explained, travelers seeking a more, “authentic cultural experience” are more likely to visit places they might have otherwise overlooked. Frisch opined that visitors who are attracted to National Geographic’s travel planning are the same people who are more likely to be good stewards of the land and respectful of cultural sites.

Typically, the sort of places included in the project are the less-obvious highlights of an area; locals may enjoy them, but they aren’t promoted through other avenues. The project will highlight non-traditional local assets such as birding, local artists, agritourism, locally owned unique businesses, and historic, cultural, as well as working landscapes. “You are the best ambassadors of this project,” said Kingman, “because it is local and of the locals, it will be more interesting to travelers.”

According to the guest speakers, geotourism is a growing international trend, and it is estimated that there are 5.5 million travelers who want authentic, place-based experiences off the beaten path when visiting an area.

Online nominations will be open January through March, 2011. Frisch noted that nominating a place is a process that can take an hour or more, but the more detailed the better. Including photos is also encouraged. To learn more about the project or to nominate your favorite place in or around the Kern Valley, go to

www.SierraNevadaGeotourism.org.

Individuals who would like to serve on the local geotourism council and help spread the word about this project, contact Chuck White at chuck_white@mchsi.com, or call (760) 379-0764. The council's next meeting is set for Tuesday, Oct. 5, from 9:00 to 11:00 a.m., at the Nuui Cunni Cultural Center near French Gulch campground.